

A different approach to public communication in Italy

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Pierluigi De Rosa is a journalist and a Communication Officer at the Italian Revenue Agency. He explores the role of communication function in the public sector and the trust relationship between government organisations and general public. He is member of FERPI (Italian PR Professionals Association) and is currently teaching assistant at Bologna University. @pderosa79

The surgery was performed by dr. Armando Antinori (...) I am not exaggerating in affirming that you would certainly not find a medical professional of his calibre carrying out an emergency night surgery in a large private hospital anywhere in the world.

With a letter to *Il Corriere della Sera* Nobel Prize Amartya Sen publicly praised the Italian public healthcare system for the care provided to his wife. Unfortunately for public communicators, this is an exception. Mainstream communication tends to associate Italian public healthcare – and more in general Italian Public Administration (PA) – with inefficiency, resource waste, and corruption.



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IL NOBEL AMARTYA SEN

La nostra notte perfetta a Roma in ospedale

L'economista racconta la sua esperienza personale vissuta nella Capitale dopo che sua moglie è stata ricoverata per un male al Gemelli. Elogio della sanità pubblica italiana

di Amartya Sen



Media coverage of Italian Public Administration constantly swings between exposing the so-called “slackers” (absentees or corrupt public employees) and – less often – praising iconic “heroes”, figures that stand out from the mediocrity of the mass. Rarely do the media cover the everyday functioning of public institutions, the work carried out by the majority of honest workers, and their efforts to change things. Are the media the only ones to blame? Not really. There is something fundamental to bear in mind: the level of trust in the public institutions, generally low in the EU area, is worryingly low in Italy (Standard Eurobarometer 84). It is reasonable to assume that the media mirror and perhaps amplify Italian citizens’ distrust of the institutions and dissatisfaction with public services.

A frequent narrative in Italian PA coverage is based on so-called "Scoundrels of badge". Here, a Council policeman that stamped in his underwear (La Repubblica, 2015, October)



One task of the public communicator is to bring balance to the citizens' perception of the PA and to consolidate the reputation of public bodies, bringing to light their positive sides. A simple press release is obviously not enough. As Charlie Beckett says, gone are the "happy pre-Internet days". Today's media landscape is way more complex. "The new measure of value for too many news organisations is virality rather than truth or quality", Katherine Viner wrote. The current information selection mechanisms are a severe obstacle for public communicators, as they tend to reinforce prejudices. A research by [IMT – School for Advanced Studies Lucca](#) (2015) on web-spread conspiracy theories shows that "misinformed" users never come in contact with real news, and don't change their opinion even when they come across information that proves it unfounded.

How to create a new brand for Public Administration. First of all, it is necessary to rethink the function of public communication with the aid of two questions: what is the institution's customer promise? And: what is done to keep it?

1. **Legacy media.** The communicator needs to renegotiate newsworthiness, traditionally summed-up by bad news, good news. The narrative must cover not only "heroes" and "slackers", but also problem solving, innovation, commitment. Things have started to change: [several experiments conducted by important Italian media are introducing novel news-values](#). Mario Calabresi, Editor in chief of *La Repubblica*, wrote in his first editorial:

(...) while it is our duty to feel outraged by lazy, dishonest or corrupt public employees, we also need to know that next to these individuals there are thousands of workers keeping our institutions alive with passion and honesty (...). To avoid falling into despair we surely need indignation, but we also need solutions and alternatives that keep our hopes high and help us carry on.

2. A possible meeting point is "constructive journalism", whereby journalists not only denounce the situation but also look for solutions and indicate what can be done to overcome the problem, by giving voice to all relevant parties, including public institutions. An example of this approach is the extraordinary [NHS report](#) by *The Guardian*, which also dedicated a section to constructive journalism, [Half Full](#).
3. Giving voice to institutions shall no longer be the journalists' prerogative. The PA must develop a new way of narrating itself and obtain visibility, as an open participation space for the citizen (not only simple awareness).

The first step to disintermediation is a feasibility analysis. If the requisites are met, the second step is the identification of the news-values functional to the narration of the PA's activities: what positive contents can we convey? What positive things are we doing for our stakeholders? The third step concerns content production: this is the frontier of the so-called "brand journalism", whereby the institution no longer needs a journalist to tell its story, rather it narrates itself, becoming both a producer and a distributor of contents. The institution talks directly to its own audience and creates its own communities: [that's what some institutions are trying to do in Italy](#).

In addition to these steps, a few more organisational actions are essential, such as customer care, language simplification, bureaucracy reduction, etc. Rather than a form of storytelling, public institutions need to develop advanced forms of accountability to prove value and worth of the services they provide[\[1\]](#).

Pierluigi De Rosa

@pderosa79

[\[1\]](#) For a deeper analysis, see P. De Rosa, C. Castiglioni, *Positive news: per un nuovo racconto della Pubblica amministrazione* (in Italian): <https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.1445/84019>

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